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ABSTRACT

It was once thought that research skills were too cognitively demanding for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students. This paper presents guidelines for teaching the research process to secondary ESL students at both beginning and advanced language proficiency levels. The following steps related to writing and presenting orally a research report are described: choosing a topic; narrowing the topic and getting organized; using the library; writing the report, including an outline, bibliography, and illustrative collage; being original and avoiding copying from texts; and presenting the report, including speaking and handling questions from the audience. It is noted that the skills learned in the writing and speaking process are transferable and should reinforce other lessons and classes beyond the ESL program. Making the research report an integral part of a language classroom results in linguistic, cognitive, and social benefits, as well as improved self-esteem in preparation for mainstream classes. (LB)

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The Research Report And The Secondary ESL Student:

Structure, Support, and Success

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The Research Report And The Secondary ESL Student:

Structure, Support, and Success

(Guidelines for teaching the research process to ESL students)

Lin Vu, a former ESL student is sitting in a high school social studies class pondering how she is going to complete a research report assignment due in three weeks. After selecting a topic, Lin wonders how to begin to investigate the topic. Should she use an encyclopedia and copy the information? How can this report take so long to complete if the information is in one book? This confused student also wonders why the teacher assumes that the notetaking and the writing are easy skills to complete once the topic has been selected.

It was once thought that research skills were so cognitively demanding that only the most advanced students were capable of carrying out the tasks involved in a research project. Therefore, English as a Second Language (ESL) students could never be expected to handle this type of work since they lacked even the simplest English language. Fortunately, this misconception has changed, and instructors are discovering that beginning language learners, even at a primary level, are capable of investigating a topic in depth. Teaching ESL students research strategies provides skills that will not only bridge the learning gap in mainstream classes, but will give students like Lin Vu the language and study skills needed to be successful in classes with native English speakers.

It is never too early to teach students research skills. Though this process takes time and effort, the rewards are beneficial. For many students a research paper is a frustrating experience. Students become so overwhelmed by the long and complicated process that they give up. Teachers can eliminate failure and reduce anxious feelings by giving students a process to follow from beginning to end. The teacher guides the students step by step building upon each completed task so that students experience success and not frustration.

The authors of this article will describe the steps they have used to prepare secondary ESL students at both beginning and advanced language proficiency levels to **write** and **orally** present a research report.

CHOOSING A TOPIC

The first step in this research process is to choose a topic. Selecting an appropriate topic can be a difficult task for ESL students because of their limited language and vocabulary. For this reason, it is best to have the research report linked to a lesson that the class has been studying so that everyone has a common framework from which to begin.

One way to initiate the research report is to integrate it as a culminating activity to a lesson. For example, after a beginning level ESL class had completed a reading selection about how some species of snakes lay eggs, the students were curious as to how other animals also reproduced. This interest led the students to apply what was learned about snakes to other animals. Without realizing it, students were exploring other topics and developing language and study skills. The research process had begun.

Students were then asked to think about an animal they would like to learn more about. The teacher wrote down the names of animals the students had suggested. For those students who were unable to think of an animal, the teacher helped out by displaying library books, showing films and bringing in realia. Next, students discussed any information they could recall about these animals. This activation of prior knowledge is a critical first step in the research process. It provides the motivation for researching new information. This sharing of information began the data collection for the research.

At this point, students were requested to select an animal that interested them for further investigation. By following this process, the selection of a topic became an informed decision rather than a random choice. **The students now had a topic for their research report and were ready to proceed.**

GETTING READY

Before going to the library, students needed to narrow down their topic and get organized. The teacher asked students what additional information they would like to know about their animal. The students responded by writing questions. Answers to these questions would form the basis of the students' reports. To help the beginning students, the teacher wrote down the students' questions. Then they were asked to group similar questions into categories such as habitat, eating patterns, etc. (See Illustration I.)

HABITAT

Where does the racoon live?
Where does the racoon sleep?
How does the racoon make a nest?
What does this animal do when it is winter?

ENEMIES

What animals are enemies of this animal?
How does this animal protect itself from enemies?
What happens when the animal sees people or other animals?

(Illustration 1)

The more advanced students followed the same procedure. However, more time was spent analyzing the questions as to their relevancy. A relevant question was one that fit into broad categories which had been determined previously by the class. Through this technique, students could easily recognize which questions would be eliminated because they were irrelevant.

This questioning technique not only helped students begin their research in an organized way, it reinforced language skills as well. This created an opportunity to review key words needed for making questions, as well as word order patterns. By the end of the class, the students were able to see that although their animals were different, the categories they were going to research were similar.

The students were required to use notecards to organize their information which helped keep them on task while in the library. The students wrote each question under its category on a separate index card to be kept in a large envelope which they had designed as covers for the final report.

Keeping track of the sources used was a new experience for many students. Key terms like "source" and "bibliography" were introduced, and students were shown how to complete a bibliography card for each new book they used. **Now equipped with their questions in an organized form, the students had a purpose for their investigation.**

USING THE LIBRARY

Because the students had prepared extensively prior to going to the library, they were ready for the next step. For the beginning students, the librarian had already collected easy-to-read encyclopedias and books about animals. In addition, these students were able to use the books and other materials the teacher had on display in the classroom. However, the advanced students had to locate their own reference materials by using the card catalog.

The students worked in the library to find answers to the questions on their index cards. Beginning level students, though not always able to read all the materials they found, could locate the appropriate pages by using the table of contents and index. By using reading skills such as skimming for key words or describing pictures, the students were able to complete their notecards. The advanced students were able to complete their notecards more easily, presumably because they had better reading skills.

It appeared that this experience was rewarding for the students since they talked to each other about their new information and many returned to the library after school to continue their work. **As the students gathered information in the library, the research started to take shape and they seemed eager to continue this project.**

WRITING THE REPORT

When the research was completed, it was time to take all this data and begin writing. For the beginning language learners, the teacher gave students a summary sheet with the same categories as their index cards. Depending on the level of the beginning class, filling in the summary sheet could be the final report. Others could rewrite the information on the index cards into paragraph form for their final report.

The advanced language learners were able to extend the research process beyond the summary sheet. The students used the summary sheet as a basis for outlining their information. From the outline, these students developed their report. However, before the students undertook the process of writing, the teacher showed an example of a completed report. The students were asked to identify the parts of the written report such as introduction, thesis statement, main ideas, pertinent details and conclusion. The teacher introduced the concept of how to write an introductory and concluding paragraph. Each category from the summary sheet was then developed into a paragraph. The final report included the introduction, body (which reflected the students' research), and conclusion.

In addition to the report, the students included a bibliography page citing each source used. Before submitting the report to the teacher, the students drew or designed pictures representative of their topic on a poster board. This collage was used as speaking points for the oral presentation. **The final product then included the cover sheet, the outline, the report, the bibliography page, plus the collage, which were all attached to the poster board.**

BEING ORIGINAL

A frequent complaint teachers have when reading the students' research reports is that there is too much copying from the texts. Included here are some techniques that teachers used throughout the research process to encourage originality.

For the beginning students, the principal focus was to show them that they could find answers to their questions. The students used phrases and new vocabulary words from the sources they were using to accomplish this task successfully. Later the teacher helped the students rewrite this information in original sentences.

One approach that prevented the advanced students from plagarizing was to require them periodically to paraphrase their research both orally and in writing. First, students presented a preliminary 60-second oral summary on one category they had already researched. To aid the students, the teacher modeled an oral summary on one aspect of a topic emphasizing originality. Another technique was to ask students to write a cohesive paragraph on each category using their own words. Students were encouraged to defend their writing, thus ensuring they really understood their topic. When either the oral or written technique was used, paraphrasing became more manageable and natural to the students. **It was pleasurable as well as enlightening for the teacher to read the final reports because the students' personalities were reflected in their writing as they made the effort to be original.**

PRESENTING THE REPORT

Before the students presented their information to the class orally, some listening strategies and presentation strategies were discussed. First, the class had to understand the importance of being good and quiet listeners. They were not permitted to interrupt, distract or correct the presenter. In addition, they learned the value of asking questions at the end of the presentation when they needed further clarification.

To help put the presenter more at ease, the teacher introduced some presentation strategies. One such approach was for the teacher to model an oral report emphasizing important points such as:

- speaking clearly and slowly,
- opening the presentation with an introduction,
- recounting interesting facts researched,
- closing the presentation,
- fielding any questions and thanking the audience.

When a question was asked by one of the students in the class that the presenter could not answer, strategies on how to effectively respond without embarrassment helped the presenter maintain his or her confidence. After developing the students' speaking and listening skills, they were ready for the next step - the oral presentation.

Students were not nervous now that they were armed with new skills. While presenting the oral report, the outline and collage were used as speaking aids. The students were discouraged from memorizing their report. Instead, the outline served as a reminder of important facts, and the collage was used to elaborate on details. Since students were not memorizing anything, anxiety was reduced because there was nothing to forget. **The skills learned in the writing and speaking process are transferable and should reinforce other lessons and classes beyond the ESL program.**

SUMMARY

Making the research report an integral part of a language classroom results in linguistic, cognitive, and social benefits. Primarily, students are acquiring and applying language and study skills that they may not have been exposed to prior to this activity. In addition, students are being challenged intellectually to complete several tasks before they reach completion of their project. This activity also provides an opportunity for students to develop their social skills because they are required to interact with others - the teacher, the librarian, and other students. Most importantly, our ESL students achieved self-esteem through having completed a meaningful project that gave them skills for success in mainstream classes. When students master this process, no longer will they reach mainstream classes and feel frustrated by an assignment like "the research report". Let's hope the following will happen more often:

As the teacher reviewed important points to be included in the upcoming research report, a smile suddenly appeared on Lin Vu's face. "Oh, I know what I have to do first," she whispered to herself as she remembered the steps of the research report she had done in her ESL class. Sure, this topic may be different than her prior one, but having had the experience of once choosin a topic, forming key questions, taking notes in her own words, organizing the information, and presenting the report in both written and oral forms no longer seems like an impossible task. In fact, this should turn into a challenging and rewarding learning experience as well!